



The Saturiwa Trail (4.4-mile loop)

Fort George Island State Cultural Park Timucuan Trail State and National Parks



Note: The numbers in the text below correspond to numbers along the road. Numbers begin at the Ribault Club and continue as you drive or walk north (toward Kingsley Plantation). Continue in a counter-clockwise direction until you return to the Ribault Club.

1: Ribault Club, Fort George Hotel site, shell midden -- This site has been occupied by people for thousands of years. The Ribault Club and its predecessor, the Fort George Hotel (built in 1875 and destroyed by fire in 1888), were constructed atop a prehistoric shell midden. While construction destroyed the upper levels of the midden, artifacts recovered from undisturbed lower levels indicate a probable occupation over four thousand years ago.

The Ribault Club is named for 16th-century French explorer Jean Ribault. The club opened in 1928 and provided its affluent owners with services including lawn bowling, a yacht basin, and a nine-hole golf course. While these services have disappeared, the old fairways, ponds, open woodlands and hammocks provide excellent hiking and birding opportunities.

The visitor center is open to the public Wednesday through Sunday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The exhibits at the visitor center expand upon the natural and cultural history illustrated on this tour.

2: Mount Cornelia -- At 65 feet above sea level, Mt. Cornelia (to your right) is reputed to be the highest point along the Atlantic coastline south of North Carolina.

In 1736 General James Oglethorpe, founder of the Georgia Colony, may have built his fort, known as Fort Saint George, on Mt. Cornelia.

During the late 1800s, Mt. Cornelia was a recreational focus for visitors to the Fort George Hotel. Tourists viewed the mouth of the St. Johns River from a large observation platform atop the dune. Later this spot was one of the golf course tees.

3: Canopied roads, end of pavement -- As you follow the unpaved road through the interlocking trees and vines overhead, you can readily understand why the Indian term “hammock” translated as “shady place.” Besides creating a cool place to escape the intense Florida sun, these maritime hammock forests are home to a small plant called Spanish moss. Though not really a moss, this air plant has been utilized by island residents for centuries. Sixteenth-century illustrations show many examples of Timucuan women using Spanish moss as skirts.

More recently, it has been used as cordage, mattress stuffing, and seat padding of Model A Fords. During the citrus-growing period of the Rollins era on Fort George (see #24), Spanish moss from the

island's trees was used to pack oranges and grapes grown on the island. Spanish moss remains an important source of nesting material for wildlife, and helps define the island's southern charm.

4: Point Isabella, 5th and 6th fairways -- During the plantation era of the 18th and 19th centuries, Point Isabella may have served as the plantation's wharfing facility. A Kingsley family name, Isabella was also used to designate a variety of grape developed on the island and marketed during Rollins' tenure. The concrete seawall visible today was part of a marina development proposed by Admiral Victor Blue (see # 14).

Point Isabella can be reached on bicycle or foot along the 6th fairway, cleared in 1928 as part of Ribault Club's nine-hole Scottish-style golf course. In the 1960s, nine additional fairways were cleared to create an 18-hole course. The last effort to maintain a golf course on Fort George Island ended in 1991.

5: Private homes -- Homes in this immediate area are developed on lots originally subdivided by John F. Rollins, who purchased the island in 1869.

Notice the changes in species and size of the vegetation in the woods to the right. Fort George has adapted to successions of residents, and gently camouflages the clues of previous occupants. During the Rollins era on Fort George (1869-1910), this vicinity was used for family gardens, grapes, and mulberries.

6: Kingsley Plantation -- Operated by the National Park Service as part of the Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve, Kingsley Plantation offers an excellent opportunity to learn more about Sea Island plantation life in the mid-19th century. Visitors are welcome to tour the grounds and buildings, which are open from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. daily. Restroom facilities are available at this site. You can tour the grounds, which include the oldest standing plantation house in Florida, the barn, kitchen, and the remnants of 23 tabby slave quarters.

7: Pine plantation -- During the years prior to the Civil War, plantation agriculture was the dominant activity on the island. Multiple owners raised cash crops of Sea Island cotton and sugar cane, in addition to such subsistence crops as corn, beans, and sweet potatoes.

Retired Navy Admiral Victor Blue was responsible for much of the development activity on the island during the early 20th century. Blue planted pine trees in abandoned plantation fields on the west side of the island. Most of the large live oak trees you see pre-date the pines surrounding them. During the plantation era, the oaks were used to divide fields, and the shade was likely appreciated if and when the slaves had the opportunity to escape from the blazing sun.

8: Palmetto Avenue: Avenue of Palms -- Instead of the rich forest canopy along the old plantation road, imagine large fields stretching back from the road, with only occasional large live oak trees for shade. Today, the sabal palms that line the road here are slowly being dwarfed by the pine trees and forest vegetation that now occupy the old fields. This very road was the one used by the slaves to go to toil in the fields.

The stately palms provide a sense of the island's history. Photographs from the 1800s can be seen at the Kingsley Plantation visitor contact station.

9: San Juan Del Puerto, mission and associated village site -- The first European settlers on the island were Spanish missionaries who in 1587 established the mission of San Juan del Puerto (St. John of the Port), now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Excavations near here documented both Indian (Saturiwa tribe of the Timucua) and Spanish occupation. Missions were commonly placed in existing Indian villages such as this one to Christianize and assimilate native populations across North Florida.

In 1595, Franciscan Father Francisco Pareja described this mission as very ornate with a bell tower and organ. His Confessionario, an account of mission life, became a primary source for information about Timucuan life ways and language. The document was written in the native tongue and Spanish.

Destroyed in 1597 by Guale Indians who didn't subscribe to the European religion and culture, the mission was rebuilt, and served the entire region for over 100 years. Use of the island's original name, Alimacani, declined in favor of San Juan during the 1600s.

The mission was destroyed in 1702 by British Governor James Moore of South Carolina and was not rebuilt.

10: San Juan Creek, Intracoastal Waterway -- Today's salt marsh skyline is defined by the cooling towers and smokestacks of the St. John's Electrical Park. These additions to a natural viewscape provide a constant reminder of the delicate balance between modern needs and our natural resources.

Approximately one mile west of Fort George Island, large commercial and recreational watercrafts ply the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway. European colonists' vessels required deeper waterways than those of the island's native inhabitants, and colonists found coastal navigation difficult due to tidal changes and oyster bars. Those shallow areas initiated early consideration of a permanent channel between the Sea Islands and the mainland. . The Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway extends from Miami northward 1,391 miles to Trenton, New Jersey. Near Fort George Island, the channel is maintained to a depth of 12 feet below Mean Low Water.

11: Mosquito ditching -- In years past, interior wet areas like the one immediately east of the roadway, as well as marsh-upland boundaries, were ditched and drained in an effort to eliminate freshwater breeding sites for mosquitoes. Unfortunately, construction of the ditches allowed species that were more difficult to control to thrive. Researchers today are learning what other effects the ditching program may have had on the natural resources of coastal areas such as Fort George Island.

12: Garden Creek marshes -- Tremendous volumes of water move through the filtering marshes during each tidal cycle. During extremely high tides, the road here is inundated by tidal waters. There are approximately five acres of tidal marsh between the road and the upland where almost 2.5 million gallons of water flush in and out of this small marsh twice daily. Now look to the west and imagine how much water must flow in and out of the entire tidal marsh system. The productivity of salt marshes is among the highest of any biological community on earth. Early inhabitants of this island used the shellfish from the marsh as a dietary staple. Today, development and pollution threaten the ability of coastal marshes to function as nurseries and filters for estuarine life.

13: Mill site -- Near here are the remains of an old sugar mill or cotton gin from the late 18th or early 19th century. The only clue to the exact identity of this site was a circular earthwork with a central

depression. Although an excavation in the 1960s unearthed three metal gears and 60 metal blades, these artifacts could not substantiate the exact use of this site.

14: Indigo and the Plantation Period -- The early plantation owners of this property were Richard Hazard (owner from 1765 to approximately 1771), who received his plantation as a land grant, and Patrick Tonyn, who owned the island from 1774 to 1783. They exported indigo to England, which subsidized the crops to encourage colonists to settle and develop Florida.

15: Blue's Pond -- Blue's Pond, 1-1/4 miles up this old road, was an old ditch that was expanded into a borrow pit for expansion of the golf course. Today, Blue's Pond is an important freshwater source for the island's wildlife. Wood storks, mergansers, raccoons and marsh rabbits are frequently seen by sharp-eyed observers at the pond.

16: Crypts -- Two nearby crypts are believed to have housed the remains of Ann Bayard Houstoun, sister-in-law, and Mary McIntosh, daughter, of John H. McIntosh. Both died in 1808. It is unfortunate that the crypts have been heavily vandalized and consequently are not accessible.

17: Saturiwa -- Each culture that occupied the island has cleared, farmed, or built, altering the island's landscape. The Indians who greeted Jean Ribault in 1562 were members of the Saturiwa tribe, who called the island "Alimacani." These residents discarded tremendous amounts of shells on the islands. In addition to aiding in subsequent occupants' construction and agriculture, the slowly decaying shell middens today provide habitat for plants not found within hundreds of miles.

One hundred-forty years after Jean Ribault landed on the island, Jonathan Dickinson described in his journal of the island a surprisingly developed landscape, where the mission was established in an existing Indian village. No surface indications remain of that village, although exhaustive research has located its boundaries.

Each culture was affected by the previous occupant's activities, and in turn guides subsequent uses of the island. The island's moderate climate, convenient location, and luxuriant flora have camouflaged and absorbed the impacts of each phase of occupation, and create the lovely and dynamic island today's visitors enjoy.

Tabby ruin (structure beyond stop sign - no tour stop number) -- This structure is believed to have been built around the 1850s and is a typical tabby structure. Careless hands and feet have damaged the structure, and threaten its survival for future visitors. Please do not walk or climb on the walls or structure.

Tabby was an ideal method of masonry construction for locations like Fort George, where outcrops of rocks do not occur. Use of oyster shells in tabby construction was first reported in the Americas circa 1580, by the Spanish and their slaves. On Fort George, oyster shell from Indian middens was gathered, burned at a high temperature, and then crushed to a powdery consistency. Crushed shell was mixed with equal parts of sand and water, and mixed with whole shell aggregate. The tabby mixture was poured into wooden molds and dried for several days before the next layer was added. (Continue to road to Ribault Club.)

18: St. George Episcopal Church -- Established in 1877, the St. George Episcopal Church was one of twelve “Carpenter Gothic” river missions built along the St. Johns River in the late 19th century. Visitors are welcome at worship services held every Sunday.

19: Rollins Bird and Plant Sanctuary -- The Rollins Bird and Plant Sanctuary was donated to the State of Florida by Rollins College in 1950 and is managed by the Florida Park Service as part of the Talbot Islands State Parks. The parcel was named to recognize John Rollins.

Rollins initiated a new cycle of ownership and land use on the island. A New Hampshire chemist, he recognized the marketability of the island’s mild climate. Shortly after his arrival and subsequent purchase of the island, he invited authors to visit, and soon articles began appearing in magazines such as Scribner’s and Harper’s, extolling the pleasant climate and rich soils of the island. Rollins and two partners built a small hotel on the site of the Ribault Club in 1875, and platted the island into residential lots.

The salt marshes visible here are northeast Florida’s only Class II marshes, an indicator of low pollution and good water quality. Maintaining the quality of those marshes by managing adjacent uplands is an important aspect of the Florida Park Service’s responsibility as well as many other agencies associated with Fort George Island.

20: Fort George botany -- Fort George Island has a long history of attraction for scientists. Naturalists John and William Bartram visited the island during the English period in the late 1700s, and remarked on the rich plant life. Today, visitors can see many species the Bartrams observed, such as the resurrection fern. During lengthy dry periods, this small fern, found on logs, trees, shell middens, and old buildings becomes dormant, dries, and turns a lifeless brown. Within hours of a good shower, though, the ferns fill out, green up, and are “resurrected!”

Sharp-eyed observers in late summer and fall may enjoy the subtle blooms of the greenfly orchid, which grows on large oak branches in this portion of the island. The small dark evergreen leaves contrast nicely with the pale-green floral clusters that remain in bloom for several weeks.

21: NELMAR: Admiral Victor Blue House -- This large house was built by John Stuart in 1877. Stuart was the father-in-law of Rear Admiral Victor Blue, who gained prominence during the Spanish-American War. Blue also subdivided much of the island into lots. These lots were offered to members of private clubs such as the Army-Navy, Fort George, and Ribault Clubs that Blue helped organize.

Private residence -- Please respect the privacy of island residents. They’ve been very supportive of visitors, and we’d really hate to wear out our welcome.

22: Little Talbot Island overlook -- From an abandoned golf tee, the vista toward the southeast includes SR A1A, a highway linking the entire Florida Atlantic coastline. Thousands of people pass daily along this important recreational, commuting, and commercial route between Jacksonville and Amelia Island to the north.

But Fort George Island still maintains a rural character. Fish thrive in the saltwater habitats surrounding the island, and the mild climate is sustained by the nearby Atlantic Ocean. Ferns and coralroot orchids grow in the deep woods, while greenfly orchids and resurrection ferns adorn the live oak branches.

23: Ribault Club -- We hope you've enjoyed this brief glimpse into the natural and cultural resources of Fort George Island. From here, the old fairways beckon visitors to stroll the edges, enjoying the variety of wildlife that takes advantage of the variety of available habitats. A pair of great horned owls raises a family every spring in the deep woods north of the course, and during winter evenings, a grey fox is often observed patrolling the wooded edges. Snags along the fairways provide excellent opportunities to watch red-shouldered hawks, osprey, or the occasional bald eagle. Spring and autumn migrations insure colorful warblers in the brushy areas, where busy Carolina wrens entertain year-round.

Recently the Ribault Clubhouse has been renovated; please tour and enjoy this historic building of Fort George Island. As staff time and funding permit, maintained trails will be developed at the interest points addressed in this brochure. Restoration and maintenance of historic structures are the most costly of FPS endeavors on the island. Individual and corporate contributions fill a growing gap between available funds and funds needed to restore, maintain, and present park resources to the level required. Your contribution can help.

The Ribault Clubhouse, Kingsley Plantation and 700 plus acres of natural Fort George Island environment provide ample opportunities for visitors to park the car and venture into "The Real Florida!"

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Note: Information about the stops on this trail comes from a variety of sources. Source information can be obtained at the Kingsley Plantation visitor center and at the Fort George Island visitor center in the Ribault Club. Kingsley Plantation (904.251.3537) and Ribault Club (904.251.2802/2320) are free and open to the public.

This tour was originally published by the Florida Park Service's Little Talbot Island State Park. It was adapted for the web by the National Park Service in 2004.

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Updated 8/27/05